

Stress Inoculation Therapy

Stress Inoculation Therapy (SIT) is a psychotherapy method intended to help patients prepare themselves in advance to handle stressful events successfully and with a minimum of upset. The use of the term "inoculation" in SIT is based on the idea that a therapist is inoculating or preparing patients to become resistant to the effects of stressors in a manner similar to how a vaccination works to make patients resistant to the effects of particular diseases.

Stress Inoculation Therapy is conceptually similar to Relapse Prevention methods used in addictions therapy. In SIT, patients are educated about stressful situations and the general nature of stress, the negative outcomes they may be vulnerable to experiencing when confronted with stress, and steps they can take to avoid those negative outcomes. At the conclusion of stress inoculation efforts, patients should feel like they can anticipate pitfalls that may occur during an event, and have a workable and practical plan in place for helping themselves avoid those pitfalls.

Stress inoculation has three phases:

In the **initial conceptualization** phase, the therapist educates the patient about the general nature of stress (offering much the same information as contained in the earlier sections of this document), and explains important concepts such as appraisal and cognitive distortion that play a key role in shaping stress reactions. The idea that people often and quite inadvertently make their stress worse through the unconscious operation of bad coping habits is conveyed. Finally, the therapist works to develop a clear understanding of the nature of the stressors the patient is facing.

A key part of what needs to be communicated in the SIT conceptualization stage is the idea that stressors are creative opportunities and puzzles to be solved, rather than mere obstacles. Patients are helped to differentiate between aspects of their stressors and their stress-induced reactions that are changeable and aspects that cannot change, so that coping efforts can be adjusted accordingly. Acceptance-based coping is appropriate for aspects of situations that cannot be altered, while more active interventions are appropriate for more changeable stressors.

The second phase of SIT focuses on **skills acquisition and rehearsal**. The particular choice of skills taught is important, and must be individually tailored to the needs of individual patients and their particular strengths and vulnerabilities if the procedure is to be effective. A variety of emotion regulation, relaxation, cognitive appraisal, problem-solving, communication and socialization skills may be selected and taught on the basis of the patient's unique needs.

In the final SIT phase, **application and follow through**, the therapist provides the patient with opportunities to practice coping skills. The patient may be encouraged to use a variety of simulation methods to help increase the realism of coping practice, including visualization exercises, modeling and vicarious learning, role playing of feared or stressful situations, and simple repetitious behavioral practice of coping routines until they become over-learned and easy to act out.

SIT has been conducted with individuals, couples, and groups (both small and large). The length of intervention can be as short as 20 minutes or as long as 40 one hour weekly and biweekly sessions. In most instances, SIT consists of 8 to 15 sessions, plus booster and follow-up sessions, conducted over a 3-to-12-month period.

Meditation: A simple, fast way to reduce stress

Meditation can wipe away the day's stress, bringing with it inner peace. See how you can easily learn to practice meditation whenever you need it most.

If stress has you anxious, tense and worried, consider trying meditation. Spending even a few minutes in meditation can restore your calm and inner peace.

Anyone can practice meditation. It's simple and inexpensive, and it doesn't require any special equipment.

And you can practice meditation wherever you are — whether you're out for a walk, riding the bus, waiting at the doctor's office or even in the middle of a difficult business meeting.

Understanding meditation

Meditation has been practiced for thousands of years. Meditation originally was meant to help deepen understanding of the sacred and mystical forces of life. These days, meditation is commonly used for relaxation and stress reduction.

Meditation is considered a type of mind-body complementary medicine. Meditation can produce a deep state of relaxation and a tranquil mind.

During meditation, you focus your attention and eliminate the stream of jumbled thoughts that may be crowding your mind and causing stress. This process may result in enhanced physical and emotional well-being.

Benefits of meditation

Meditation can give you a sense of calm, peace and balance that can benefit both your emotional well-being and your overall health.

And these benefits don't end when your meditation session ends. Meditation can help carry you more calmly through your day and may help you manage symptoms of certain medical conditions.

Meditation and emotional well-being

When you meditate, you may clear away the information overload that builds up every day and contributes to your stress.

The emotional benefits of meditation can include:

- Gaining a new perspective on stressful situations
- Building skills to manage your stress
- Increasing self-awareness
- Focusing on the present
- Reducing negative emotions
- Increasing imagination and creativity
- Increasing patience and tolerance

Meditation and illness

Meditation might also be useful if you have a medical condition, especially one that may be worsened by stress.

While a growing body of scientific research supports the health benefits of meditation, some researchers believe it's not yet possible to draw conclusions about the possible benefits of meditation.

With that in mind, some research suggests that meditation may help people manage symptoms of conditions such as:

- Anxiety
- Asthma
- Cancer
- Chronic pain
- Depression
- Heart disease
- High blood pressure
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Sleep problems
- Tension headaches

Be sure to talk to your health care provider about the pros and cons of using meditation if you have any of these conditions or other health problems. In some cases, meditation can worsen symptoms associated with certain mental and physical health conditions.

Meditation isn't a replacement for traditional medical treatment. But it may be a useful addition to your other treatment.

Types of meditation

Meditation is an umbrella term for the many ways to a relaxed state of being. There are many types of meditation and relaxation techniques that have meditation components. All share the same goal of achieving inner peace.

Ways to meditate can include:

- **Guided meditation.** Sometimes called guided imagery or visualization, with this method of meditation you form mental images of places or situations you find relaxing.

You try to use as many senses as possible, such as smells, sights, sounds and textures. You may be led through this process by a guide or teacher.

- **Mantra meditation.** In this type of meditation, you silently repeat a calming word, thought or phrase to prevent distracting thoughts.
- **Mindfulness meditation.** This type of meditation is based on being mindful, or having an increased awareness and acceptance of living in the present moment.

In mindfulness meditation, you broaden your conscious awareness. You focus on what you experience during meditation, such as the flow of your breath. You can observe your thoughts and emotions, but let them pass without judgment.

- **Qi gong.** This practice generally combines meditation, relaxation, physical movement and breathing exercises to restore and maintain balance. Qi gong (CHEE-gung) is part of traditional Chinese medicine.
- **Tai chi.** This is a form of gentle Chinese martial arts. In tai chi (TIE-CHEE), you perform a self-paced series of postures or movements in a slow, graceful manner while practicing deep breathing.
- **Transcendental Meditation®.** Transcendental Meditation is a simple, natural technique. In Transcendental Meditation, you silently repeat a personally assigned mantra, such as a word, sound or phrase, in a specific way.

This form of meditation may allow your body to settle into a state of profound rest and relaxation and your mind to achieve a state of inner peace, without needing to use concentration or effort.

- **Yoga.** You perform a series of postures and controlled breathing exercises to promote a more flexible body and a calm mind. As you move through poses that require balance and concentration, you're encouraged to focus less on your busy day and more on the moment.

Elements of meditation

Different types of meditation may include different features to help you meditate. These may vary depending on whose guidance you follow or who's teaching a class. Some of the most common features in meditation include:

- **Focused attention.** Focusing your attention is generally one of the most important elements of meditation.

Focusing your attention is what helps free your mind from the many distractions that cause stress and worry. You can focus your attention on such things as a specific object, an image, a mantra, or even your breathing.

- **Relaxed breathing.** This technique involves deep, even-paced breathing using the diaphragm muscle to expand your lungs. The purpose is to slow your breathing, take in more oxygen, and reduce the use of shoulder, neck and upper chest muscles while breathing so that you breathe more efficiently.
- **A quiet setting.** If you're a beginner, practicing meditation may be easier if you're in a quiet spot with few distractions, including no television, radios or cellphones.

As you get more skilled at meditation, you may be able to do it anywhere, especially in high-stress situations where you benefit the most from meditation, such as a traffic jam, a stressful work meeting or a long line at the grocery store.

- **A comfortable position.** You can practice meditation whether you're sitting, lying down, walking, or in other positions or activities. Just try to be comfortable so that you can get the most out of your meditation. Aim to keep good posture during meditation.
- **Open attitude.** Let thoughts pass through your mind without judgment.

Everyday ways to practice meditation

Don't let the thought of meditating the "right" way add to your stress. If you choose to, you can attend special meditation centers or group classes led by trained instructors. But you can also practice meditation easily on your own.

And you can make meditation as formal or informal as you like, however it suits your lifestyle and situation. Some people build meditation into their daily routine. For example, they may start and end each day with an hour of meditation. But all you really need is a few minutes of quality time for meditation.

Here are some ways you can practice meditation on your own, whenever you choose:

- **Breathe deeply.** This technique is good for beginners because breathing is a natural function.

Focus all your attention on your breathing. Concentrate on feeling and listening as you inhale and exhale through your nostrils. Breathe deeply and slowly. When your attention wanders, gently return your focus to your breathing.

- **Scan your body.** When using this technique, focus attention on different parts of your body. Become aware of your body's various sensations, whether that's pain, tension, warmth or relaxation.

Combine body scanning with breathing exercises and imagine breathing heat or relaxation into and out of different parts of your body.

- **Repeat a mantra.** You can create your own mantra, whether it's religious or secular. Examples of religious mantras include the Jesus Prayer in the Christian tradition, the holy name of God in Judaism, or the om mantra of Hinduism, Buddhism and other Eastern religions.
- **Walk and meditate.** Combining a walk with meditation is an efficient and healthy way to relax. You can use this technique anywhere you're walking, such as in a tranquil forest, on a city sidewalk or at the mall.

When you use this method, slow down your walking pace so that you can focus on each movement of your legs or feet. Don't focus on a particular destination. Concentrate on your legs and feet, repeating action words in your mind such as "lifting," "moving" and "placing" as you lift each foot, move your leg forward and place your foot on the ground.

- **Engage in prayer.** Prayer is the best known and most widely practiced example of meditation. Spoken and written prayers are found in most faith traditions.

You can pray using your own words or read prayers written by others. Check the self-help section of your local bookstore for examples. Talk with your rabbi, priest, pastor or other spiritual leader about possible resources.

- **Read and reflect.** Many people report that they benefit from reading poems or sacred texts, and taking a few moments to quietly reflect on their meaning.

You can also listen to sacred music, spoken words, or any music you find relaxing or inspiring. You may want to write your reflections in a journal or discuss them with a friend or spiritual leader.

- **Focus your love and gratitude.** In this type of meditation, you focus your attention on a sacred image or being, weaving feelings of love, compassion and gratitude into your thoughts. You can also close your eyes and use your imagination or gaze at representations of the image.

Building your meditation skills

Don't judge your meditation skills, which may only increase your stress. Meditation takes practice.

Keep in mind, for instance, that it's common for your mind to wander during meditation, no matter how long you've been practicing meditation. If you're meditating to calm your mind and your attention wanders, slowly return to the object, sensation or movement you're focusing on.

Experiment, and you'll likely find out what types of meditation work best for you and what you enjoy doing. Adapt meditation to your needs at the moment. Remember, there's no right way or wrong way to meditate. What matters is that meditation helps you reduce your stress and feel better overall.

Yoga

An estimated 80 to 90 percent of visits to the doctor are stress-related but only less than 3% of doctors talk to their patients about how to reduce stress. Yoga, meditation, and other mind-body practices train your body and mind to be able to cope with stress better and improve overall health and well-being.

In a national survey, over 85% of people who did yoga reported that it helped them relieve stress. Exercise is a very useful way to relieve stress, but yoga is different from spinning class or weight-lifting in that it powerfully combines both physical fitness with an underlying philosophy of self-compassion and awareness. One of

the main concepts in yoga is being non-judgmental toward both yourself and others, which is a powerful tool for stress relief since much of our stress comes from us being hard on ourselves or frustrated with others.

A fundamental principle of yoga is that your body and mind are one and connected. Stress in one domain will affect the other and vice versa. Many of us live primarily in either our mind or our body, which creates imbalance and even a lack of awareness. For example, people with very analytical careers may spend a lot of time in their mind, and may not realize how much tension is stored in their body. Or if you're an athlete, you may be keenly aware of your body, but could benefit from becoming more aware of your mental state. Wherever you fall on this spectrum, yoga you helps balance and tone the connection between your body and mind.

Yoga also trains your counter-stress response system called the parasympathetic nervous system. With regular yoga practice, your chronic daytime stress hormone levels drop and your heart rate variability increases, which is measure of your ability to tolerate stress. This has been shown to improve even after a few sessions of yoga.

How can you integrate yoga into your daily life to get rid of stress?

1. Use your breath.

Breath is key to connect with your body and turn down the dial of stress.

Start with learning Ujjayi breath (a.k.a. Ocean Breath) and use it in each pose. Take a deep slow breath through your nose and exhale through your nose while constricting the back of your throat in the "ha" shape, but keep your mouth closed. Your breath should be loud enough that someone next to you could hear it and should sound like the waves of the ocean or like Darth Vader from Star Wars.

Try a calming breath called Alternate Nostril Breathing.

2. Here are yoga poses for stress relief. Use your Ujjayi breath in each pose.

Child's Pose

Standing Forward Bend

Low Lunge Pose

Yogi Squat / Garland Pose

Fierce Pose

Lizard Pose

Bound Angle Pose

Legs Up the Wall

Modified Legs Up the Wall using a chair

3. Take 15 minutes a day to do a guided meditation.

Meditation is an important part of yoga and has been shown to effectively reduce stress. Try a short guided meditation to unwind at the end of a stressful day:

4. Practice RAIN.

Tara Brach, a psychologist and meditation teacher, describes this acronym RAIN-- a mindfulness tool to help you deal with stress and cope with difficult situations:

- R – Recognize what is happening
- A – Allow life to be just as it is
- I – Investigate inner experience with kindness

- N – Non-Identification—the realization or awareness that we are not defined or limited by our emotions or stories.

5. Aim to be kind to yourself.

Kindness and positive emotions protect and cushion you from the burdens of stress and have been shown to improve physical health and depression.

It's really easy to learn to be hard on ourselves, so unlearning that self-judgment can be difficult but worthwhile. Being self-compassionate doesn't come naturally for most people, so it takes concerted practice and intention every day.

How can you begin to remember to be kind to yourself on a daily basis? It's different for everyone. Maybe you can give yourself time to spend time with a close friend, let yourself spend extra time playing music that you usually don't let yourself enjoy, or perhaps try a loving kindness meditation.

By extending kindness and love to ourselves first and foremost, we are able to expand our ability to accept, forgive, and love. Positive emotion will naturally grow around you and reduce stress both yourself and the people around you.

So even if you're not doing a pose on your yoga mat, by being kind to yourself early every day, you are doing yoga in one of its most powerful forms.

Guided Imagery For Relaxation

You may have heard of guided imagery as a stress management technique, but do you know how it works, why it's useful, and how it measures up against other stress relievers? Guided imagery is widely used for Guided imagery is an effective stress management technique and has remained popular for several reasons. It can quickly calm your body and simultaneously relax your mind. It's pleasant to

practice, and not overly difficult or intimidating to learn. And it can help you to de-stress in minutes, but can also be a useful strategy for maintaining resilience toward stress during difficult times. If this sounds like something you can use in your life, read more about when guided imagery is used, and how it may be a useful go-to stress reliever for you.

Guided Imagery is a convenient and simple relaxation technique that can help you quickly and easily manage stress and reduce tension in your body. It's virtually as easy as indulging in a vivid daydream and, with practice, this technique can help you to better access your inner wisdom.

There are a few different ways to practice using guided imagery, including taking a class where you are "guided" by an instructor, using audio recordings, creating your own recordings, or using your inner voice and imagination. Here we'll examine the benefits and drawbacks of this simple and engaging stress management technique and explore how it compares to other methods so you can determine how guided imagery may fit into your life. Then we'll delve into the practice of guided imagery and the different ways of using it. We'll look at methods of using your own thoughts, simply because this takes the least amount of preparation and expense; however, you can also explore guided imagery at many yoga studios, with recordings, and through an experienced therapist. You can also record your own guided imagery tapes. First, let's take a closer look at the practice itself.

Guided Imagery's Effects on the Body

Guided imagery has been found to provide significant stress reduction benefits, including physically relaxing the body quickly and efficiently and even helping participants get in touch with deeper levels of wisdom (held on a subconscious level) that would help them better manage their lives in ways that would reduce stress. The studies demonstrating the health benefits of imagery are so numerous that many hospitals are incorporating imagery as an option to help with treatment. Fortunately, it's a simple enough technique that it can be used at home as well, with positive results.

What's Involved?

With the help of a guided imagery recording, a professional helper, or just one's own imagination, those who practice guided imagery get into a deeply relaxed state and envision, with great detail relating to all of the senses, a relaxing scene. This scene may be something in the natural world like a beautiful waterfall in Hawaii with sparkling and refreshing water at the bottom or a cool and dense forest where you may take a calming walk in your imagination. It could also be a relaxing or happy event such as a vividly-imagined scene where you discover a \$50 bill on the sidewalk and eat a delicious meal in a restaurant by the beach, or win the lottery and buy whatever you want.

Those who use guided imagery for stress relief may also imagine a wise 'guide' with them, answering their questions and asking them questions that they must ponder in order to get to a better place in their lives. (This 'guide' is a representation of their subconscious mind that they aren't generally able to access.)

What Are the Pros?

Imagery can provide relaxation, insight, and wisdom. It is a free stress-relieving therapy and, with practice, can be done just about anywhere. It can help you to relieve physical tension and psychological stress at the same time, distracting you from what may be stressing you, and getting you into a more positive frame of mind. In this way, it can also be useful in disrupting patterns of rumination and can help you to build resources in your life that increase your resilience toward stress by engaging an upward spiral of positivity.

What Are the Cons?

Like self-hypnosis, it can take some practice to master autonomous guided imagery. Working with a professional therapist to get to that point can be somewhat costly, but worthwhile. Alternatively, there are many downloadable recordings you can use to get started or follow the simple instructions in this article on guided imagery.

How Does It Compare to Other Stress Reduction Methods?

For the benefits it provides, it's an excellent stress management option. It can be easier than exercise or even yoga for those with physical limitations. It has no risk of side effects like some medical and herbal therapies. Using it for simple relaxation is easy and can be done by just about anyone, but accessing an internal 'guide' takes more practice than other methods like progressive muscle relaxation or breathing exercises. It's similar to self-hypnosis in that you're getting into a deep state of relaxation and dealing with your subconscious mind. However, with self-hypnosis, you're more often implanting ideas into your subconscious mind, whereas imagery focuses more on extracting ideas from it.

Practicing Guided Imagery:

Now that you understand the basics of this stress management tool, let's get into how you can practice it. The following are general guidelines to help you understand the process of guided imagery, and be able to practice it on your own. Here's how to make guided imagery practice work for you.

Get Comfortable

Get into a relaxed position, like the one you would use for meditation or self-hypnosis. If a lying-down position would likely put you to sleep, opt for a cross-legged position or recline in a comfortable chair. Try to position yourself in a way where your physical comfort won't be a distraction.

Breathe From Your Belly

Use diaphragmic deep breathing and close your eyes, focusing on "breathing in peace and breathing out stress." This means letting your belly expand and contract with your breath--if you find your shoulders rising and falling, you are likely carrying tension in your body and not breathing in the most relaxed way.

Choose a Scene and Vividly Imagine It

Once you get to a relaxed state, begin to envision yourself in the midst of the most relaxing environment you can imagine. For some, this would be floating in the

cool, clear waters off of a remote tropical island, where attractive people bring drinks and smooth music plays in the background. For others, this might be sitting by a fire in a secluded snow cabin, deep in the woods, sipping hot cocoa and reading the latest bestseller while wrapped in a plush blanket and fuzzy slippers.

You may want to remember a time and place when you felt wonderful and relaxed (a "happy place" in your memory), a vividly-described scene from a book you love, or the way you imagine a place you've always wanted to visit.

Immerse Yourself In Sensory Details

As you imagine your scene, try to involve all of your senses. What does it look like? How does it feel? What special scents are involved? Do you hear the roar of a fire, the splash of a waterfall, or the sounds of chipper birds? Make your vision so real you can even taste it! (Noticing these details in your daily life is a way to increase your mindfulness, which brings lasting stress management benefits as well.)

Relax

Stay here for as long as you like. Enjoy your 'surroundings', and let yourself be far from what stresses you. When you're ready to come back to reality, count back from ten or twenty, and tell yourself that when you get to 'one', you'll feel serene and alert, and enjoy the rest of your day. When you return, you'll feel calmer and refreshed, like returning from a mini-vacation, but you won't have left the room!

Tips

1. You may want to use ambient sounds that compliment your imagery. This way, you feel more immersed in your 'environment', plus the sounds of real-life will be obscured.
2. You may also want to set an alarm, just in case you lose track of time or fall asleep. This way, you'll be more able to relax and let go, knowing that your schedule won't be in jeopardy.

3. As you get more practiced, you'll be able to go more deeply and quickly. You may also want to communicate with your subconscious mind, with the help of a tape you record for yourself or purchase, or a therapist.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is an anxiety-reduction technique first introduced by American physician Edmund Jacobson in the 1930s. The technique involves alternating tension and relaxation in all of the body's major muscle groups.

If you suffer with social anxiety disorder (SAD), your muscles are probably tense most of the time. By practicing PMR, you will learn how a relaxed muscle feels different from a tense muscle.

Progressive muscle relaxation is generally used along with behavioral therapy techniques such as systematic desensitization. However, practicing the technique alone will give you a greater sense of control over your body's anxiety response.

How to Practice Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Find a quiet place free from distractions. Lie on the floor or recline in a chair, loosen any tight clothing, and remove glasses or contacts. Rest your hands in your lap or on the arms of the chair. Take a few slow even breaths. If you have not already, spend a few minutes practicing diaphragmatic breathing.

Now, focus your attention on the following areas, being careful to leave the rest of your body relaxed.

1. **Forehead.** Squeeze the muscles in your forehead, holding for 15 seconds. Feel the muscles becoming tighter and tenser. Then, slowly release the tension in your forehead while counting for 30 seconds. Notice the difference in how your muscles feel and the sensation of relaxation. Continue to release the tension in your forehead until it feels completely relaxed. Continue breathing slowly and evenly.
2. **Jaw.** Tense the muscles in your jaw holding for 15 seconds. Then, release the tension slowly while counting for 30 seconds. Notice the feeling of relaxation and continue to breathe slowly and evenly.
3. **Neck and shoulders.** Increase tension in your neck and shoulders by raising your shoulders up toward your ears and hold for 15 seconds. Slowly release the tension as you count for 30 seconds. Notice the tension melting away.
4. **Arms and hands.** Slowly draw both hands into fists. Pull your fists into your chest and hold for 15 seconds, squeezing as tight as you can. Then, slowly release while you count for 30 seconds. Notice the feeling of relaxation.
5. **Buttocks.** Slowly increase tension in your buttocks over 15 seconds. Then, slowly release the tension over 30 seconds. Notice the tension melting away. Continue to breathe slowly and evenly.
6. **Legs.** Slowly, increase the tension in your quadriceps and calves over 15 seconds. Squeeze the muscles as hard as you can. Then, gently release the tension over 30 seconds. Notice the tension melting away and the feeling of relaxation that is left.
7. **Feet.** Slowly, increase the tension in your feet and toes. Tighten the muscles as much as you can. Then, slowly release the tension while you count for 30 seconds. Notice all the tension melting away. Continue breathing slowly and evenly.

Enjoy the feeling of relaxation sweeping through your body. Continue to breathe slowly and evenly.

Voice Recording

In addition to following these instructions, you may consider using a voice recording such as the free MP3 audio file offered by McMaster University with

directions on practicing progressive muscle relaxation. Use of an audio recording allows you to fully relax and concentrate on the technique.

Efficacy of PMR for Anxiety

A systematic review conducted in 2008 and published in the journal *BMC Psychiatry* showed the efficacy of relaxation training, including PMR, in the treatment of anxiety. Therefore, if you are looking for evidence-based options to help treat your social anxiety, PMR may be a good choice.

Relaxation techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation can be helpful for mild to moderate social anxiety, or when practiced alongside traditional treatment such as cognitive-behavioral therapy or medication. However, if you find yourself living with severe untreated social anxiety, it is important to consult with a doctor or other mental health professional to obtain suitable treatment.

How to Reduce Stress with Breathing Exercises

Breathing exercises offer an extremely simple, effective, and convenient way to relieve stress and reverse your stress response, reducing the negative effects of chronic stress. There are definite benefits of breathing exercises. While simple diaphragmic breathing can provide relaxation and stress relief, there are several different types of breathing exercises to try, each with its own twist. Here are several breathing exercises, some of which are commonly recommended, some of which are unique, and all of which can each offer help in managing stress. This is an easy exercise that only takes a few minutes. Here's how.

Mindful Diaphragmic Breathing

Get into a comfortable position, close your eyes, and start to notice your breath. Before you begin to alter it, pay attention to the pace and depth. Are you taking deep breaths or shallow ones? Are you breathing quickly or slowly? (Becoming aware of your breathing can help you to become more mindful of your body's

response to stress, and can help you to notice when you need to deliberately relax your breathing.)

Counted Breathing

Counting your breaths can be helpful, both for pacing and as a form of meditation. This technique helps with pacing—it enables you to elongate your breath and stretch out your exhales. There are a few ways to do this.

- As you inhale, place your tongue on the roof of your mouth right behind your teeth, then breathe through your nose and slowly count down from five; on the exhale, let the air escape through your mouth and count back up to eight. Then repeat. This helps you to really empty your lungs and relax into each breath.
- A variation of this is known as "4-7-8 breathing," and is recommended by wellness expert Dr. Andrew Weil. With this option, you inhale for a count of four, wait for a count of seven, and exhale for a count of eight. This allows you to pause between breaths and really slow things down.

Visualization Breathing: Inflating the Balloon

Get into a comfortable position, close your eyes, and begin breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth. As you inhale, imagine that your abdomen is inflating with air like a balloon. As you exhale, imagine that the air is escaping the balloon slowly. Remember, you do not have to force the air out; it simply escapes on its own, in its own time. You may want to imagine the balloon as your favorite color, or that you are floating higher in the sky with each breath if this is relaxing for you. Regardless, the "inflating balloon" visualization can help you to breathe deeply from your diaphragm rather than engaging in shallow breathing that can come from stress.

Visualization Breathing: Releasing Your Stress

Get into a comfortable position, close your eyes, and start diaphragmic breathing. As you inhale, imagine that all the stress in your body is coming from your extremities and into your chest. Then, as you exhale, imagine that the stress is

leaving your body through your breath and dissipating right in front of you. Slowly, deliberately repeat the process. After several breaths, you should feel your stress begin to subside.

How to Use Guided Imagery for Relaxing in 5 Simple Steps

Deep, Cleansing Breath

Sometimes all you need to release stress from your shoulders, back, or the rest of your body is a few big, cleansing breaths. Breathe in deeply through your nose, and take in as much air as you comfortably can. Then release it, and really focus on emptying your lungs. (Many people hold air in their lungs after an exhale, so emptying your lungs on a deep exhale can help you to get more fresh oxygen into them.) Repeat this breathing exercise for a few breaths and release the tension in your back, your shoulders, and anywhere else it tends to reside.

Alternate Nostril Breathing

This breathing exercise variation has been practiced for thousands of years as a form of meditative breathing. As you inhale, place your finger over your right nostril and only breathe through your left. On the exhale, switch nostrils and only breathe through your right. You can breathe at whatever pace is comfortable for you, either a 5-8 ratio, a 4-7-8 ratio or whatever pace feels most relaxing for you (see "counted breathing," above).

There are numerous other ways to practice breathing exercises, but these are some of the most popular and effective. Here are a few more options to try—scroll to the bottom of the page and follow the links. Experiment and see which work best for you!

The A-B-C-D Model – Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

It is developed by one of the Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) founders: Albert Ellis, PhD. This model can help one think and act more rationally, thus lead a stress free life.

Background

We, as humans, are creatures of habit. Since our early age, we start to formulate our own interpretations and view of the world (and all the interactions that happen therein).

To some extent, one can say that our interpretations and views are constructed based on original believes, acquired believes (society, friends, family, peers, media, etc..) or well thought and learned believes.

After we form a certain belief, or judgement, the next time we encounter a situation (or a stimulus), we don't think and reevaluate the situation again, instead we rely on the automatic thoughts that we previously formulated.

Automatic thoughts, do not have to be based on reality, instead they could be formulated based on preconceptions or various negative situations and then we tend to generalize and believe the generalization.

For example: you have been treated badly many times by rich people. You then come to a conclusion that all rich people are snobby and disrespectful / full of themselves.

That belief may have been true in the past when you formulated it, but today the situation is different. You are faced with another rich person that does not necessarily exhibit haughtiness or disrespect. But instead, due to our automatic believes, we will directly judge and generalize.

This is where Cognitive Behavioral Therapy comes in, to slowly re-learn and re-adjust the believes.

The ABC cognitive behavioral therapy works because of the simple premise that we think and act, roughly in four mental steps:

1. Stimulus: what caused a certain thought or belief to trigger. A situation for example.
2. Emotions and feelings: what did the stimulus trigger within ourselves? What kind of conclusion did we come up with? Are we angry? etc.
3. Actions and behavior: how did we choose to react to the emotions that was evoked? We got angry because of our automatic believes, thus we raise our voice, fight or become mean for example
4. Repeat: a new stimulus comes in, emotions are evoked, actions entail.

The A-B-C-D model

The A-B-C-D is a classic model, it is outlined below and can be used in a variety of circumstances, to help one think and act more rationally:

- A = Activating Event. This refers to the initial situation or “trigger”. This is basically the situation at hand that triggered your mental though process.
- B = Belief System. Your interpretation of the situation, what you tell yourself about the event (your self talk) and your beliefs and expectations of others.
- C = Consequences. How you feel and what you do in response to your belief system (the emotional and behavioral consequences).
- D = Dispute. Examine your beliefs and expectations. Are they unrealistic or irrational? If so, what may be an alternative, more rational appraisal of the situation? A more realistic interpretation is likely to lead to different, healthier emotional and behavioral consequences.

Putting the ABC model into practice

Here is a simple example to illustrate the model:

A-Activating event-You're strolling down the street and someone you know walks right by you without saying hello.

B-belief system-You think to yourself, "What did I do? He/she must be upset with me or doesn't like me anymore."

C-Consequences-You start to worry and feel bad about yourself, then you get a little angry and decide to give this person the cold shoulder next time you see them.

D-Dispute-then you catch yourself and say, "Wait, he/she probably didn't see me; perhaps he/she was distracted by something difficult that happened earlier that day."

After you say this to yourself, you notice that you feel more relaxed, less worried, more rational. You decide to approach this person next time you see them to inquire about how they've been doing.

For the model to work, awareness is the first step. The "B" part (one's belief system) is very conditioned (i.e., our beliefs and expectations of others are often conditioned by past experiences). Therefore, the thoughts and self-talk that initially occur are typically quite automatic and happen on a subconscious level.

The challenge is to pause, slow down and increase your level of awareness to identify the contents of A, B and C. With this information, you're then more empowered to evaluate the situation rationally and alter your response (the "D" part) in a healthier way.

A great way to start experimenting with this model is to write down the contents of A-B-C on a piece of paper after you experience a challenging or difficult situation. Once you review A, B and C, fill in the D part (assuming that you didn't already take this step). Writing the information down is better than trying to sort it thru in your mind. Writing will heighten your awareness, bring more clarity and make a

more lasting imprint on your memory bank. Practicing the ABCDs after the fact will eventually lead to implementing these changes in the moment, when you're actually experiencing the problem.

The Power of Music to Reduce Stress

The soothing power of music is well-established. It has a unique link to our emotions, so can be an extremely effective stress management tool.

Listening to music can have a tremendously relaxing effect on our minds and bodies, especially slow, quiet classical music. This type of music can have a beneficial effect on our physiological functions, slowing the pulse and heart rate, lowering blood pressure, and decreasing the levels of stress hormones. Music, in short, can act as a powerful stress management tool in our lives.

As music can absorb our attention, it acts as a distraction at the same time it helps to explore emotions. This means it can be a great aid to meditation, helping to prevent the mind wandering.

Musical preference varies widely between individuals, so only you can decide what you like and what is suitable for each mood. But even if you don't usually listen to classical music it may be worth giving it a try when selecting the most calming music.

When people are very stressed, there is a tendency to avoid actively listening to music. Perhaps it feels like a waste of time, not helping to achieve anything. But as we know, productivity increases when stress is reduced, so this is another area where you can gain vast rewards. It just takes a small effort to begin with.

To incorporate music into a busy life, try playing CDs in the car, or put the radio on when in the bath or shower. Take portable music with you when walking the dog, or put the stereo on instead of the TV. A person with clinical depression or bipolar disorder might listen to music to help with their worst, lowest moods.

Singing (or shouting) along can also be a great release of tension, and karaoke is very enjoyable for some extroverts! Calming music before bedtime promotes peace and relaxation and helps to induce sleep.

Research on Music

Music has been used for hundreds of years to treat illnesses and restore harmony between mind and body. But more recently, scientific studies have attempted to measure the potential benefits of music. These research studies have found:

- Music's form and structure can bring order and security to disabled and distressed children. It encourages coordination and communication, so improves their quality of life.
- Listening to music on headphones reduces stress and anxiety in hospital patients before and after surgery.
- Music can help reduce both the sensation and distress of both chronic pain and postoperative pain.
- Listening to music can relieve depression and increase self-esteem ratings in elderly people.
- Making music can reduce burnout and improve mood among nursing students.
- Music therapy significantly reduces emotional distress and boosts quality of life among adult cancer patients.

Meditation

Certain music is appropriate for meditation as it can help the mind slow down and initiate the relaxation response. However, not all peaceful or "New Age" music works for everyone. Music with no structure can be irritating or even unsettling. Gentle music with a familiar melody more often is comforting. But search around to find what produces a sense of calm, familiarity, and centeredness for you as an individual.

The sounds of nature often are incorporated into CDs made specifically for relaxation. For example, the sound of water can be soothing for some people. It can help conjure up calming images such as lying beside a mountain stream on a warm spring day. Birdsong may also be of use as an aid to help your mind slow down and release stressful thoughts.

Biofeedback and Stress Relief

Biofeedback is a way to measure the body's physiological responses in real-time, and a tool to learn to control them. Biofeedback generally relies on machines that measure heart rate, muscle tension or even brain waves, and usually requires a therapist or other health professional to operate the machine, explain what the readings mean, and work with clients to incorporate the information into lifestyle changes. However, there are some exceptions to this, which we'll discuss later on in this article.

How Does Biofeedback Work?

Most often, biofeedback helps people control their stress response, by realizing when it's underway and employing relaxation techniques like deep breathing, visualizations, and meditation to calm their physiological arousal. Many of the benefits of biofeedback simply come from the increased relaxation in your body and the lack of a chronically triggered fight-or-flight response. Because chronic stress can be a trigger for many negative health symptoms, this can offer a significant and palpable improvement in the way people feel and how their bodies function.

By helping you learn how your body is currently functioning, biofeedback can help you to know what to change. Also, by showing you in 'real-time' which relaxation techniques are working and which aren't, you're able to more easily grasp effective ways to relax your body's physiology and incorporate healthier habits into your lifestyle.

What Does It Treat?

Because biofeedback can with stress-related conditions by helping to reverse the stress response (and help you keep from letting it be triggered in the first place!), it can be useful with a variety of conditions.

Biofeedback has been popularly used for anxiety, tension headaches, pain, IBS, general stress, and several other conditions.

How to Get Started With Biofeedback

There are some ways in which you're probably already using a very simple form of biofeedback:

- **Physical Awareness:** Some physical responses can be easily sensed without equipment, of course. When your body becomes tense, that's a natural message that you're stressed. Shallow breathing can be another. Becoming aware of your body's stress signals can arguably be a sort of natural form of 'biofeedback'.
- **Household Tools:** Scales, thermometers, and even mirrors can tell you about some of your body's functioning by pointing out excess weight, fevers, and visible signs of stress like acne.

Both of these methods tell you about your physiology and help you to know that healthy changes are required, but are only the tip of the iceberg. Traditional biofeedback usually involves much more sophisticated measurements that can change more rapidly and are more difficult for the layperson to detect on their own. Usually, standard biofeedback necessitates the use of a biofeedback technician—a therapist or health professional—but recently, home biofeedback equipment has become readily available to consumers. Wild Divine is a pioneer in this field, and has created a home biofeedback system that hooks up to your home computer, takes measurements from three fingers, and tells you in real-time how your physiology is responding to the meditation and stress management techniques it teaches you with the help of health gurus like Deepak Chopra, Dr. Dean Ornish, and Dr. Andrew Weil. I've used their system and personally think it's great.

As mentioned, there are also many biofeedback practitioners out there who can help you understand how your physiology is responding to stress, and help you to perfect strategies to calm your body and your mind, and stay healthier in the process. One of the best ways to find a good practitioner is to ask your doctor for a referral.

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is an anxiety-reduction technique first introduced by American physician Edmund Jacobson in the 1930s. The technique

involves alternating tension and relaxation in all of the body's major muscle groups.

If you suffer with social anxiety disorder (SAD), your muscles are probably tense most of the time. By practicing PMR, you will learn how a relaxed muscle feels different from a tense muscle.

Progressive muscle relaxation is generally used along with behavioral therapy techniques such as systematic desensitization. However, practicing the technique alone will give you a greater sense of control over your body's anxiety response.

If you practice this technique correctly, you may even end up falling asleep. If so, congratulate yourself on obtaining such a deep level of relaxation, and for the work that you did up until that point.

For those who suffer with medical conditions, be sure to consult with your doctor prior to beginning any type of relaxation training exercise.

How to Practice Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Find a quiet place free from distractions. Lie on the floor or recline in a chair, loosen any tight clothing, and remove glasses or contacts. Rest your hands in your lap or on the arms of the chair. Take a few slow even breaths. If you have not already, spend a few minutes practicing diaphragmatic breathing.

Now, focus your attention on the following areas, being careful to leave the rest of your body relaxed.

1. **Forehead.** Squeeze the muscles in your forehead, holding for 15 seconds. Feel the muscles becoming tighter and tenser. Then, slowly release the tension in your forehead while counting for 30 seconds. Notice the difference in how your muscles feel and the sensation of relaxation. Continue to release the tension in your forehead until it feels completely relaxed. Continue breathing slowly and evenly.
2. **Jaw.** Tense the muscles in your jaw holding for 15 seconds. Then, release the tension slowly while counting for 30 seconds. Notice the feeling of relaxation and continue to breathe slowly and evenly.

3. **Neck and shoulders.** Increase tension in your neck and shoulders by raising your shoulders up toward your ears and hold for 15 seconds. Slowly release the tension as you count for 30 seconds. Notice the tension melting away.
4. **Arms and hands.** Slowly draw both hands into fists. Pull your fists into your chest and hold for 15 seconds, squeezing as tight as you can. Then, slowly release while you count for 30 seconds. Notice the feeling of relaxation.
5. **Buttocks.** Slowly increase tension in your buttocks over 15 seconds. Then, slowly release the tension over 30 seconds. Notice the tension melting away. Continue to breathe slowly and evenly.
6. **Legs.** Slowly, increase the tension in your quadriceps and calves over 15 seconds. Squeeze the muscles as hard as you can. Then, gently release the tension over 30 seconds. Notice the tension melting away and the feeling of relaxation that is left.
7. **Feet.** Slowly, increase the tension in your feet and toes. Tighten the muscles as much as you can. Then, slowly release the tension while you count for 30 seconds. Notice all the tension melting away. Continue breathing slowly and evenly.

Enjoy the feeling of relaxation sweeping through your body. Continue to breathe slowly and evenly.

Voice Recording

In addition to following these instructions, you may consider using a voice recording such as the free MP3 audio file offered by McMaster University with directions on practicing progressive muscle relaxation. Use of an audio recording allows you to fully relax and concentrate on the technique.

Efficacy of PMR for Anxiety

A systematic review conducted in 2008 and published in the journal *BMC Psychiatry* showed the efficacy of relaxation training, including PMR, in the treatment of anxiety. Therefore, if you are looking for evidence-based options to help treat your social anxiety, PMR may be a good choice.

Relaxation techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation can be helpful for mild to moderate social anxiety, or when practiced alongside traditional treatment such as cognitive-behavioral therapy or medication. However, if you find yourself living with severe untreated social anxiety, it is important to consult with a doctor or other mental health professional to obtain suitable treatment.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction: What it Is, How it Helps

Mindfulness is Buddhist practice adapted to mental health purposes. The essence of mindfulness practice is focusing on one thing in the moment—each breath you take, each step as you walk, the sights or sounds around you.

Elisha Goldstein, PhD writes about and teaches mindfulness, particularly an approach called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), captured in his recently published A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook, co-authored with Bob Stahl. He talked to me via email about what Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is and how it helps:

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction is a formal eight-week program with a daylong intensive that was created by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979 and has now been adapted to a workbook format to support people in doing this work. This program is in over 250 hospitals around the country and many more around the world supporting people with stress, anxiety, depression, chronic pain, alleviating stress related to medical conditions and much more.

As the story goes, Jon told the doctors in the chronic pain unit to give him the patients that the medication was not working for. He thought that helping them work with these progressive set of mindfulness practices in a group format would help them develop the ability to see the pain more objectively and learn how to relate to it differently so they would suffer less from it.

Turns out he was right! Since 1979 there has been a tremendous amount of research coming out of Harvard, UCLA, Stanford, UW-Madison and many more high ranking institutions providing us the insight into how this approach is helpful and how it not only works, but how it actually can change our brains for the better.

To explain how this works, let me throw out one of my favorite quotes by psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl:

"Between stimulus and response there's a space, in that space lies our power to choose our response, in our response lies our growth and our freedom."

In other words, there's a moment of choice before we react to stress and pain in life. However, for most of us, we're unaware of this space "between stimulus and response" because we get caught in habitual patterns of reacting to life. Maybe a car cuts us off on the highway and we have a thought, "what is wrong with that guy," while our heart begins to beat faster and our hands begin white knuckling the steering wheel. Anger boils within and feeds our thoughts about how he needs to be taught a lesson. We speed up next to him to stare him down letting him know that we know what he has done.

This is stressful and highly unpleasant situation fueled by the ongoing, and unconscious, interaction between our thoughts, feelings, emotions and behavior. I would argue there was no choice in this situation because the driver was unaware of this stress reaction, however there was a space or spaces in between the moment he was cut off and the reaction that ensued.

The MBSR program helps us become more aware of these habitual reactions and helps us relate to ourselves in a new way to interrupt this cycle and create more choice in life. Maybe upon reflection we realize that reacting to the guy who cut us off that way only increased our stress and didn't make a difference to the other driver, maybe even just angering him more. So in the future we become more aware of this reaction by noticing our hands white knuckling the steering wheel or heart racing alerting us to the stress reaction occurring. In that moment we are present and are sitting in that space between stimulus and response. We then choose to take a few deep breaths, let our shoulders relax a bit, and even consider

the unpleasant state the other driver must be in to be driving that way. Maybe we even wish him well, because if he was, he wouldn't be driving that way.

In doing the work of this program, participants begin to realize that they can break through long held fears that have held them back from the living the lives they wanted to live.

MBSR is such a rich program and an enormous gift to the world. I am grateful to be a teacher of it and to have been a part of the creation of A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook. May this go onto support your readers in changing their lives as it has mine and tens of thousands of other people around the world.